

January 20, 2015

TESTIMONY OF GREG WICHMAN

Hilger, Montana

President of the Montana Wool Growers Association

In support of HB 145 (Rep. Cuffe)

- Good afternoon members of the Committee, Mr. Chairman.
- My name is Greg Wichman. I am presently the President of the Montana Wool Growers Association. I am a resident of Hilger, Montana.
- I rise in support of House Bill 145.
- Federal and State wildlife officials have indicated that the federal government will likely seek to delist from the Endangered Species Act grizzly bear populations around Yellowstone Park as soon as the Spring of 2015 and around the Northern Continental Divide by 2016.
- This is great news in light of the fact that grizzly bears in Montana have been federally managed under the auspices of the Federal Endangered Species Act since 1975.
- After 40 years of being managed under the Endangered Species Act, it is time for management of this species to be turned over to the State of Montana, and it is time to end the endless lawsuits filed by self-styled environmental groups to prevent that delisting from occurring.
- While all Montanans can celebrate the success of the grizzly bear recovery efforts, there is a reality that comes along with the grizzly bear population growth. That reality is that the State will need to be prepared to immediately assume management of the species. And one Montana legislator is working overtime to ensure that Montana is ready for that eventuality.
- During the 2013 Montana legislative session, this legislature passed legislation to allow the State of Montana to compensate Montanans for livestock losses that occur as a result of a grizzly bear kill.
- Prior to Representative Cuffe's bill, a livestock owner received no compensation for a verified grizzly loss from either the State or the Federal Government despite public ownership of these animals.
- Since that time, Montana's livestock producers have been reimbursed to the tune of almost \$34,000 for losses resulting from grizzly bear depredations.
- That program is good public policy because it recognizes that livestock producers alone should not have to bear the financial burden associated with grizzly bear recovery efforts.
- So too is the present bill good public policy.

- This bill is designed to prevent livestock-grizzly bear conflicts in the first instance so that
(1) the State of Montana isn't paying out for damage done by grizzly bears and
(2) livestock producers aren't losing their livestock to grizzly bear kills.
- It's a win-win scenario.
- As Representative Cuffe mentioned, during the last legislative session, Representative Cuffe was able to move this legislation through the House.
- This legislation implements what is widely considered to be a missing piece of grizzly bear management, that piece being the need to prevent livestock-grizzly bear conflicts in the first instance.
- Though Governor Bullock inexplicably line-item vetoed the funding the legislature provided source, everyone can agree that the best grizzly bear management practices are those that prevent bears from getting into trouble with either livestock or humans in the first instance.
- And that's what this bill does. It secures a source of funding for the State to institute programs that prevent livestock-bear conflicts before they happen.
- Such programs could include paying for flagging, electric fences, livestock protection dogs and the like.
- This bill will build on the work already performed by the livestock loss board in terms of instituting wolf-livestock conflict prevention programs.
- The idea here is to integrate non-lethal management into an integrated program already existing to deal proactively with large predator species.
- This bill is good public policy, and is the right bill at the right time.
- In closing, Montana's sheep industry recognizes and applauds Representative Cuffe for his proactive work on the grizzly bear management issue.
- We also thank him for his foresight in implementing programs that will help the grizzly bear delisting effort, which, in turn, will help both Montana's agriculture producers and other natural resources industries operate without overzealous government interference.